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Defense of the Clones: Lucas's Latest: Cheap Thrills or Sophisticated Filmmaking?

David Begor

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A close reading points to the latter.

For those who see popular film as capable of providing more than cheap visceral thrills, the dismal nature of recent writing on *Attack of the Clones* is disheartening. While most critics have lauded the film for pushing the boundaries of digital filmmaking, few seem willing to treat it as serious cinema. Their skepticism is reasonable: for how can any film aimed so overtly at a younger audience merit much attention from older and presumably more sophisticated ones?

Yet *Attack of the Clones* is quite sophisticated cinema, being an intricately constructed allegorical and symbolic tale with a powerful moral message: it is only by mastering the evils that lurk within themselves that its heroes ultimately conquer those that threaten them from without. Drawing on the monomythic theories of the late anthropologist Joseph Campbell, *Attack of the Clones* is a remarkably literate film. And while some of Lucas' harsher critics have ridiculed his intellectual ambitions as pretentious, with one even accusing him and Campbell of indulging in "pseudo-mythic hogwash", it is worth remembering

that if his views alone deserve the term vapid, then so does much of the Western Canon by extension.[1]) The notion that violence is circular ("blood will have blood") is among the most popular of literary themes, perhaps second only to the belief that man's capacity for love is his most redeeming quality, and that with it even death is not to be feared. At the heart of Campbell's monomyth, all of these ideas pervade the *Star Wars* saga, and help elevate the most recent episode far above the level of a simple serial adventure.

In retrospect, some aspects in the original trilogy are so obviously making these points that few will claim to have missed them. Mirroring his defeat of the allegorical monster "Rancor" at the beginning of *Return of the Jedi*, for instance, it is Luke Skywalker's rejection of hatred at that film's climax that leads directly to the Rebel victory, a victory linked symbolically to the defeat of death through the destruction of the Death Star and the spiritual resurrection of Darth Vader. Other elements of the first trilogy made this same point more subtly. In some cases, such the visual allusions to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* that cap the concluding medal ceremony of *A New Hope*, the reference could only become clear in the context of the saga as a whole. In that case, the allusion to the Rebel victory as a quasi-fascist one suggested the moral hollowness of their victory achieved by military force, while setting the stage for their defeat at the start of the second film. The only enduring victories in these films are those built on love, understanding, and mutual self-sacrifice.[2]

Given that the critical press is the group most likely to be familiar with film analysis, it is remarkable that no-one has yet to point out the stubbornly obvious: that far from betraying it *Attack of the Clones* actually deepens and enriches this aspect of the

original trilogy. To those familiar with the more arcane details of Campbell's monomythic framework, Anakin can clearly be seen at the "initiation" stage of his heroic quest, the point of the mythic journey at which the moral certainties of youth crumble as the hero is forced to confront his own dark impulses. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, the film to which *Attack* bears the closest resemblance both structurally (in its two-part narrative) and thematically (in its emphasis on the fallibility of its leads), Luke's similar struggle was portrayed most powerfully through his descent into the magic tree cave on Dagobah.3 In the cave lay only what he carried with him: his latent aggression and the potential future it promised to bring. In giving into violence, Luke would become the very person he set out to destroy. Consistent with this emphasis on the dual potential of individuals, even *Empire*'s numerous settings shifted between light and dark: the heavenly Cloud City hid a hellish core while monsters of the subconscious roamed beneath the icy surface of Hoth. Evil lurked within good – but good also within evil.

The failure of many critics to understand this point – the interior rather than exterior nature of moral conflict in the *Star Wars* saga – probably explains why so many seem oblivious to the extremely literate qualities of the latest film. Yet once these are recognized, it becomes hard not to admire Lucas for his audacity in building such a complex six-part drama, and his willingness to face critical and popular scorn for pushing it through to its logical end. From its opening shots of Coruscant wreathed in fog, *Attack* plunges its audience immediately into the thematic uncertainty appropriate for a film where nothing is what it seems. Viewers must struggle to follow the plot, asking who is responsible for the assassination attempt on Senator Amidala; who has ordered the clone army; and who is fighting

whom anyway, and why? The relationships between such key characters as Palpatine and Count Dooku baffle even the Jedi, while among the film's smaller touches, we find Amidala's one-eyed security chief (touché, George) making one of the most atrociously short-sighted statements in the entire saga. "I guess I was wrong, there was no danger at all," he announces seconds before her Diplomatic Shuttle bursts into flame.

This recurring emphasis on clouds, fog, and blindness is of course symbolic: it betrays the protagonists' moral ambivalence while showing that the "shroud" of the dark side is quite literally falling. Lacking knowledge of their own potential for evil, what the characters in this film fail to understand is that their most dangerous impulses are often their most noble ones. To place this in context, remember that Luke's attack on Vader in *Empire* was driven by his love for his friends, while his rage in *Jedi* was fueled by his desire to protect his sister. Both cases were explicit moral traps. After giving in to the former (in "attacking" rather than "confronting" Vader), Luke suffered a dismemberment, fall, and symbolic crucifixion on the weathervanes below Bespin. The latter was even more dangerous: for in killing his father Luke would only have supplanted him at the Emperor's side – further perpetuating the cycle of galactic and interpersonal violence that begins in *The Phantom Menace*.

Associated with the subconscious since Homer's treatment of Neptune in the Odyssey (at least according to the nineteenth century romantics), water imagery dominates the new film.[4] As a symbol of latent aggression and hubris, it lurks in the background at those pivotal moments in the narrative where characters make terrible lapses in judgement. As a cliff-dwelling diplomat, Amidala is as logically bound to oppose the creation of an Army of the Republic as the amphibious Jar Jar is

thematically fated to support it: the deliberate division of ego and id could hardly be clearer. Lucas appropriately places the romance and marriage of Anakin and Amidala at a lakeside retreat, while he situates the Army of the Clones on the watery planet Kamino. Among the most interesting qualities of this film is the way this symbolism reinforces itself on multiple levels. Not only are the Clones an aggressive and irrational race (like the Gungans they are warriors who live in a “hidden city”), but the Jedi are as oblivious to the existence of Kamino as they are to the dangers of the pride and aggression that lurk within themselves.5

As in *The Phantom Menace*, water images are tied to lunar ones, which become associated not only with violence and aggression, but also with the maternal figures his attachment to whom is precisely what drives Anakin to the Dark Side.6 The cave imagery and dream imagery prominent in earlier episodes also returns with a vengeance. And if the use of cave symbolism was occasionally overbearing in *The Phantom Menace*, its treatment in the new film is more unobtrusive. The droid factory is located quite naturally in an underground maze, while the closing confrontation between the Jedi and Count Dooku occurs in a cavern carved into the face of a cliff.

Dream imagery also resurfaces. As Carl Jung once wrote, “The dream should be read properly as the little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul, opening into that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness, and which will remain psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness may extend.”7

And alarmingly, in *Attack of the Clones* Lucas gives us characters who suffer repeatedly from nightmares both literal and symbolic. Anakin’s visions of his mother play a critical role

advancing the plot, but also signal his emotional immaturity. The second assassination attempt on Amidala occurs appropriately enough while she sleeps. And there are numerous scattered references to the world (and life) as dreams or nightmares into which characters “fall” only to be rescued by friendship and love. The most striking of these is the transformation of C-3PO from protocol to battle droid at the climax, an event compared during the fact to a “nightmare” and afterwards to a “strange dream.”

If this last sequence is used primarily for comic relief, it also shows Lucas at his most adept, using C-3PO’s physical transformation as commentary on the more abstract metamorphoses of the other characters, whose purpose also shifts from diplomacy to war. The senate’s decision to develop an Army of the Republic is one to forgo negotiations with the separatists. By the climax even the pacific Amidala abandons diplomacy for “aggressive negotiation,” while the Jedi Council chooses to fight the forces of Count Dooku rather than surrender and risk becoming “hostages” for negotiation. As the title of the film suggests, the Republic is the aggressor in the final battle, not the separatists. And of course, the proclivity of the main characters to embrace violence holds in each of the film’s individual confrontations. Obi Wan charges at the bounty hunter Jango Fett on Kamino, while he and Anakin are the aggressive ones in their final clash with Dooku, rushing into his cave with lightsabers drawn. Even Yoda ignores the dictates of his own Zen-like counsel when commanding troops at the climax and targeting firepower on the evacuating ships of the Trade Federation.

For those attentive to how Lucas manipulates this type of logic, *Attack of the Clones* is a fascinating film with many rich and rewarding layers, and also many intriguing suggestions. For the

Jedi alone, the purposeful deception of the Senate by Yoda and Mace Windu regarding their diminishing powers is troubling, as is Lucas' very suggestive lighting of Windu throughout (he is repeatedly shown cloaked half in darkness – a visual cue last used during Luke's temptation in Jedi). The arrogance of the librarian at the Jedi Archives is equally striking. In her haughty claim that "if an item does not appear in our records, it does not exist," she echoes the mistake of the archive droids in their failed analysis of a key toxic dart. As one of the more worldly characters informs us, this failure comes from focusing on exterior "symbols" rather than trusting the holistic wisdom that flows from knowledge of the whole. Lucas' playful association of the librarian with an unthinking robot is another charming touch that works seamlessly with the film's stress on the perils of over-rationalization and its theme of encroaching mechanization. Acting like a machine is, after all, the first stage in losing one's humanity.

Oddly enough, Amidala is the only character who seems to recognize the problematic nature of uncontrolled passion. Her rejection of temptation in the seduction scene (set naturally enough to fire and moonlight) marks her shift into white costume from the progressively dark tones of her dress during her pastoral romance with Anakin (her costume shifts during these scenes from white to yellowish-red to black).8 And even here victory is short-lived. Reversing her decision in the face of impending death, Amidala's declaration of love precedes a sequence in which her costume is quite literally tattered. Morphing into the very image of her own repressed sexuality, Amidala becomes as much the symbol of her lust as does Leia in *Jedi*, the parallel holding even in such small details as the two characters' mutual use of a restraining chain as offensive

weapon.

And so lurking in *Attack of the Clones* is a far from simple commentary on the dangers of passion untempered by reason, and of reason untempered by passion. By the end of the film, the protagonists have lost the delicate balance between the two associated with moral virtue and self-awareness. Only Yoda views the outbreak of War as a defeat for the Republic at the finale, yet Lucas invites us to concur through the parallels he deliberately constructs across films. To provide a few examples of this intertextuality, the decision of the Senate to grant Palpatine emergency powers in *Attack* should recall the eerily similar crisis of *The Phantom Menace*, where Amidala's motion for a vote of non-confidence in the existing Chancellor ushered Palpatine (visually presented the devil whispering sophistry into Eve's ear) into his first position of real power.9 In that film, Amidala's misguided assault on the forces of the Trade Federation would backfire, a pyrrhic victory possible only once the deliberate (in the case of the Gungan Army and Amidala) or accidental (as with Obi Wan and Anakin) disarmament of the protagonists had been engineered deus ex machina.10 Of course, no one familiar with original trilogy or even basic color symbolism could possibly miss the other clues Lucas scatters throughout: the blood-red sky during Anakin's rage-fueled quest for his mother, the similar coloring of Palpatine's office on Coruscant, or the strains of the Imperial March struggling to liberate itself during the closing scenes of the film.

Many of these points should be obvious to even casual viewers. Catching others requires more familiarity with the saga, and often with the language of cinema itself. Deliberately reversing the logic of the opening Hoth sequence from *Empire*, the closing battle in *Attack* is filled with cross-cutting visuals of an

evacuating rebel base and an invading army of proto-stormtroopers. The presence of such early Imperial technologies as squat walkers invites further doubt as to the moral virtue of the Republican assault, as does the generally right-to-left direction of their attack (the positive direction in film being of course left-to-right) and the reddish-brown haze that masks the battlescape. Clouds are symbols of moral ambiguity and blindness: this battle is relentlessly clouded by the Dark Side.

Other images traditionally associated with the Dark Side are also on the ascendant. Masks, linked with duplicity and deception, continue to appear in the most disheartening of places (such as on Amidala in the opening scene), while the appearance of new characters like “changelings” and clones carries sinister implications in a film where good characters such as Dooku and Anakin prove equally adept at shifting allegiances. Hellish images also surface repeatedly. From the very first shot of Anakin and Amidala descending into it through steaming cracks in the earth, the droid factory plays out as a molten hell replete even with the requisite lava. As do those of the magic tree cave sequence in *Empire*, these scenes are also highly symbolic. The entrapment of Anakin’s hand in a robot assembly line not only anticipates his loss of it in the final battle with Dooku and his progressive dehumanization through the saga as a whole, it also foreshadows his inability to protect Amidala with the kind of force on which he increasingly relies, and the ultimate futility of his attempt to defeat death through violence. It is hardly coincidental that it is R2D2, *not* Anakin, who rescues her during this sequence, or that Amidala ultimately rescues herself from a gladiatorial-style execution.

Like *Empire*, *Attack of the Clones* revels in heightened images of death and dismemberment as its leads embrace increasingly

destructive behavior. The Death Star makes its first appearance and – if one counts the comic treatment of C-3PO during the final melee – there are at least five instances of dismemberment and three of decapitation in the entire film. It is of course the aggressors who suffer such fates, and the Dark Side that becomes closely associated with them. Small touches such as the Trade Viceroy demanding Amidala's head on his desk may play for humor, but also are typical of a film where casual dialogue is more perceptive and meaningful than is usually recognized.11

The most obvious way Lucas condemns violence continues to be by showing on the narrative level that aggression is the surest road to defeat. Obi Wan's assault on Jango Fett leaves him hanging below the city in a clear parallel to Luke's defeat in *Empire*. Attacking Count Dooku at the climax, Obi Wan and Anakin also assure themselves of a terrible loss at his hands. The tide of this battle does not turn until the arrival of Yoda, whose appearance significantly marks Dooku's shift from a defensive to an offensive strategy and in turn triggers his own loss. The pursuit of would-be assassin Zam Wessel provides a more subtle case in point: it succeeds only when the hunters allow themselves to become the hunted. It is a testament to Lucas' creativity that this pattern plays out in even the smallest of subplots without (five films and ten hours into the saga) becoming stale or self-evident.12

As a film in part about the perils of aggression (it is puzzling that some reviewers persist in calling it pro-war), *Attack of the Clones* has garnered some rather unusual reviews, the oddest of which has to be the *Weekly Standard's* widely circulated and presumably satirical defense of the Empire.13)

The allegorical status of key figures such as the Trade Viceroy

(greed), and the various Sith Lords (anger/hatred/death) moots this review as serious criticism. Lucas is hardly counseling us to cheer for the Emperor and his death-like minions. Nor is Count Dooku's promise of "unlimited profits" to his supporters a paean to free markets, being instead a cautionary tale about the consequences of unfettered greed. For the Dark Side is always mired in the language of commerce, an association strengthened through its reliance on bounty hunters and smugglers, and reinforced more subtly through the use of casual references to "deals" and "bargains" that backfire continually on those who make them. Obi Wan's tirade against the corruption of the Senate may sound like a call for campaign finance reform, but it serves a deeper thematic purpose in linking the decay of the Republic to the rise of taboo behaviors in individual Senators, Senators whose purpose – Lucas reminds us through seemingly casual banter between Anakin and Amidala – is to selflessly represent their constituents rather than maximize their own interests.

Attacks on Lucas as elitist and anti-democratic are equally puzzling. Far from the embrace of authoritarianism that some otherwise perceptive reviewers including David Brin insist on reading into his work, Lucas actually offers a more nuanced claim: every democracy is part Republic and part Empire. As the Jedi and Sith represent the twin extremes of human nature, so do the Empire and Republic represent the twin extremes of social communities. And so we should hardly be surprised to discover that the Republic *is* the Empire just as the Separatists *are* Rebels. The difference is qualitative, contingent on the willingness of these communities to act with the moral responsibility that comes with the power to make selfish or selfless choices. The association of the Republic with

democratic norms is sensible: it is the villains of the saga who continually justify immoral actions by invoking notions of destiny, inevitability, and/or fate. Anakin's claim that he has "no choice" but to rescue his mother (and presumably slaughter her captors) is thus an ominous one, as telling as the closure of the debate on the merits of militarization in the Galactic Senate.

All of these individual strands converge to make *Attack of the Clones* a profoundly dark film. By its climax, both the Republic and Separatists have become loose alliances led by figures closely associated with the Sith, and framed in suggestively similar visuals (note for instance the parallel balcony sequences involving Dooku and Palpatine). Like Bespin in *Empire* (the *other* Cloud City), Coruscant is here a paradise that falls through the corruption of its leaders into a hellish dystopia. The balance between the light and dark aspects of the city so evident in *The Phantom Menace* are gone, replaced with bleak visuals that slouch incessantly toward dusk and night. The impassive blues of upper Coruscant bleed imperceptibly into the city's hellish core, a setup appropriate in a film whose trajectory is wholly downward and in which references to physical and biblical falls abound. Anakin and Obi Wan throw themselves off speeders and buildings with merry abandon, while one Jedi falls to his death in the final battle, an end that conveniently echoes that of Darth Maul and anticipates that of death-figure Emperor Palpatine. Significantly, Anakin and Amidala leap down from a retracting bridge where Luke and Leia before held their balance, while even C-3PO's nightmare sequence is preceded by a fall of sorts.

As the vast majority of popular reviews attest, the allegorical and symbolic subtext of *Attack* is so unobtrusive that it is possible to view (and judge) it without once noticing its remarkable

sophistication. But how fair is that? Blithely ignoring the intellectual rigor of *Attack of the Clones* leads not surprisingly to self-fulfilling claims about its status as lowbrow cinema. Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in the popular tendency to dismiss Lucas' cinematic allusions as uncreative pastiche, with some critics even accusing him of unconscious plagiarism.14) Although most reviewers caught the reference, for instance, few realized the pod-racing sequence in *The Phantom Menace* did more than simply pay homage to the chariot race in *Ben Hur*. As a film whose dominant themes include the corrupting nature of power and the ultimate emptiness of vengeance, William Wyler's biblical classic told the story of a man driven to violence to avenge the suffering of his family at the hands of another Empire. Lucas' allusion worked on both thematic and narrative levels. It not only confirmed the pivotal role Anakin's mother would play in his transformation but also laid out his trajectory of character development through the entire saga, hinting that like Ben Hur's, Anakin's fall would come through his desire for vengeance and his eventual redemption through his embrace of self-sacrificial love.

If anything, *Attack of the Clones* is rich with such allusions. References to futurist noir classics including *Blade Runner* and *Metropolis* abound in the night visuals of Coruscant, casually reinforcing the film's dominant theme of moral decay in the city. Lucas also plays with the themes of human mechanization prominent in both of these classics. The multiple references to *The Searchers* in Anakin's rescue of his mother draw a tight parallel between Anakin and Luke while also suggesting that Anakin's quest, like Luke's, is a quest for family and love. The meaning of other prominent allusions, which range from *Gladiator* to *Lawrence of Arabia*, should be self-evident to those

even superficially familiar with these films. To those aware of the overarching plot of the saga, for instance, the clear reference to *The Sound of Music* in the pastoral romance between Anakin and Amidala hints at the encroachment of the Empire on their love, and foreshadows Amidala's flight from it with her children in *Episode III*.

While these references and countless others are hardly obscure enough to please the more elitist of cinephiles, their omnipresence hardly suggests a lack of purpose on Lucas' part. Critics excoriating him for other aspects of his film show an equal lack of sensitivity to the challenges that come with highly structured storytelling. To provide an example, one should hardly expect the Maul from *The Phantom Menace* to engage in casual Tarantinoesque banter any more than the Maul from *The Pilgrim's Progress.* Both are allegorical figures meant to represent emotional and psychological aspects of other characters. In their continual vigilance to skewer Lucas for what they see as racism, other reviewers fail to appreciate the difference between literary archetypes and popular stereotypes, or to realize that the latter are almost always based on the former.

Criticisms justified on the grounds of personal taste are harder to address. It is difficult to deny that *Attack of the Clones* lacks emotional resonance when viewed in isolation. Those unfamiliar with the saga are bound to be mystified by the more arcane plot twists. Yet if some sequences might profitably have been left on the digital equivalent of the cutting-room floor, the same can be said for any film approached with the same level of public scrutiny and high expectations as *Episode II*. Those unwilling or unable to enjoy the film as an old-fashioned serial adventure will doubtless also find some elements – such as the heavily

stylized dialogue – distracting and/or unintentionally comic. Enjoying any work of creative fantasy requires a certain suspension of disbelief, or willingness to accept the conventions of the genre. In this sense, Lucas' saga is no different than Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles,* both of whose mountain trolls and talking animals can be equally distracting.

To the extent that film criticism can claim to be objective, it must involve more than the mere cataloging of personal taste, requiring at least the thoughtful consideration of what trade-offs are involved in making changes. In closing with this thought, it is worth noting that by virtue of their focus on the technical rather than literary qualities of *Attack of the Clones*, it is not surprising that many critics have overlooked this point. Yet as this review hopes to have convinced at least some, such a narrow focus trivializes the fundamental strengths of the film, not only on its own, but as part of a remarkably unified saga. In this case, Lucas surely deserves more objective coverage.

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